

Optimizing Offspring
March 16th

Reading: Lila Guterman and Francis X. Rocca, "Choosing Eugenics: How Far Will Nations Go to Eliminate a Genetic Disease?" *Chronicle of Higher Education* 49 (2 May 2003).
Jeremy Rifkin, "Ultimate Therapy: Commercial Eugenics in the 21st Century," *Harvard International Review* 27 (Spring 2005): 44-48.

The readings this week continue the theme of parental opportunities and obligations to optimize the outcomes of pregnancy. The last set of readings focused on behavior changes that pregnant woman could / should make. These readings push this one step farther: the use of genetic technologies to eliminate genetic disease and improve the human race.

Guterman, "Choosing Eugenics": Guterman dropped out of a PhD program in chemistry at Cal Tech to become a science journalist. In this article she describes a "eugenics" project in Cyprus -- an effort to use widespread prenatal screening and abortion to reduce the incidence of thalassemia (a disease analogous to sickle cell anemia: heterozygotes have some protection against malaria, but homozygotes suffer a severe and often fatal disease). Why does eugenics have a bad reputation in the US and Europe (we will discuss this in more detail after spring break)? Why did parents of children with thalassemia support the program? Why did the Cypriot government support it? How did advocates convince the Greek Orthodox Church, which opposes abortion, to cooperate? The program has a series of critics, especially among academics in the US. What are their concerns? Why did her study of Cyprus make Ruth Schwartz Cowan (a prominent sociologist) change her mind about eugenics, and about slippery slope arguments? Do you think a similar program could succeed in the US -- what would happen if someone proposed a screening and abortion program for sickle cell anemia in the United States?

Rifkin, "Ultimate Therapy": I apologize about the pale gray text in this article; if you zoom in enough, it is legible... Rifkin is an economic and best-selling author who studies the implications of new technology for society (for his extremely self-impressed biography, see <http://www.foet.org/JeremyRifkin.htm>). In this piece, he imagines a future of rampant gene therapy. Will the ability to correct genetic 'defects' oblige all parents to pursue gene therapy (the technological imperative)? Will it be immoral for parents to refuse technology that could optimize their offspring -- would this be a "heinous crime" (p. 46)? What will happen to people currently living with genetic disabilities? How does Rifkin use slippery slope arguments? In the end, what is his argument: does he think that germ line therapy is a good idea, a technological inevitability, or something that should be prevented?